Trading Posts along the Yukon River: Noochuloghoyet Trading Post in Historical Context

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ABSTRACT. Between 1868 and 1900, American companies established a series of trading posts along a 32 km stretch of the Yukon River immediately west of Noochuloghoyet Point, a peninsula formed by the confluence of the Yukon and Tanana rivers. This study makes use of written historical accounts, historical maps, and archaeological evidence to trace the founding and locational movements of these posts. Findings indicate that in the early interior of Alaska rivers were the major transportation routes, and the English and the Russians established trading posts at major river confluences, which became centers for trade. Later, the Americans pursued patterns inherited earlier from the English and the Russians. Political considerations provided the original reason for discovery and some constraints; nevertheless economic and environmental factors appear to have been the more important considerations in the exploration and development of the Yukon River valley. Cultural considerations were only important in that they bracketed the manner in which the Euro-Americans operated.

Key words: fur traders, trading posts, Yukon River, historical maps, historical sites

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1800s, when commercial companies sought to exploit the fur resources of the pristine Alaskan wilderness of the interior, the Yukon River became one of the main access routes. The Russian American Company (Russian) established a trading post at Nulato near the confluence of the Yukon and Koyukuk rivers and the Hudson's Bay Company (English) founded Fort Yukon at the junction of the Yukon and Porcupine rivers (Fig. 1). Between Nulato and Fort Yukon is found Noochuloghoyet Point, a peninsula formed by the convergence of the Yukon and Tanana rivers. Originally, this was a place where the Indians met each year to celebrate the change of seasons from winter to spring. Both the Russian American and the Hudson's Bay companies sent trading parties to Noochuloghoyet Point to barter with the Natives for furs but established no trading posts there. Later, after the sale of Russian-America, Americans set up trading posts in the region around Noochuloghoyet Point.

During his 1926 survey of the Yukon River valley, Ales Hrdlicka noticed that early-period Athabaskan villages changed locations, but stayed in the same general area, they often retained their original names (Hrdlicka, 1930:136). This occurred because the initial village name was often a geographic place-name and construction of the new village was in the same area. Also, the same people lived in both the old and new villages. Frederica de Laguna again noticed this name retention phenomenon when she made an archaeological reconnaissance of the Yukon River in 1935. De Laguna recorded several abandoned sites with the same names, including two Old Melozis, four Lowdens, three Anviks, and three Old Stations. Anvik and Old Station had trading posts associated with the villages (de Laguna, 1947; Turck, 1991). In 1986, as part of investigations of Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) 14(h)1 applications, Bureau of Indian Affairs archaeologist Ronald Kent and crew members relocated the three former Old Station villages. One is associated with the last location of Noochuloghoyet trading post.

Because of short periods of occupation, radiocarbon dating may not always be applicable to date a particular site, and artifact seriation dating of historical trade items, such as trade beads or ceramics, may span a larger time frame than the short period most trading posts were in operation. Also, due to cost and accessibility, pedestrian survey and site testing are not always feasible. Therefore, in many instances published accounts by early travelers and fur traders become the primary sources for both descriptive and locational information.

As the succeeding study indicates, however, even when trading posts' locations are well documented in written historical accounts and on historical maps, confusion may still exist. As with the Native village sites, problems occur because of vagueries such as calling a post by a manager's name or by a prominent geographic feature, such as Noochuloghoyet Point or the Tanana River. The purpose of this paper, then, is to trace the history of the founding and locational movements of trading posts in the Yukon River area, primarily by the use of historical accounts and maps. Oral history and archaeological evidence are also considered. Following the spatial relationship reconstruction is a discussion of the economic, political, environmental, and cultural factors affecting the founding and relocations of these posts.

Father Julius Jette' (1976:71) wrote, "The confusion between the three 'Old Stations' is second only to that between the various 'Nukluroyits.'" From 1868 to the early 1900s, trading
posts all called Noochuloghoyet by military and non-military visitors had at least four locations along a 32 km stretch of the Yukon River immediately west of its intersection with the Tanana River. During certain periods, travelers called more than one trading post Noochuloghoyet at the same time. Other visitors called the same trading posts Tanana Station. Consequently, much locational confusion exists in the historical accounts and literature. Figure 2 shows Noochuloghoyet Point labeled A and the former locations of trading posts labeled B-F, while Figure 3 places them in a time frame. Throughout the text, the authors use these letters to assist in identification of the discussed landmark and buildings. Although there may be other reconstructions, the authors believe the following narrative best fits the available data.

The spelling of the trading post will be “Noochuloghoyet,” which conforms with Alaska Native Language Center orthography. Noochuloghoyet was originally an Athabaskan locational place-name given to the peninsula created by the confluence of the Tanana and Yukon rivers. The translation is “the point of the big river peninsula” (Jones, 1986:45). Because of the difficulty in pronunciation, historical accounts and map locations have many spelling variations: Nuclurowit, Nucluvette, Nukluklayet, Nukiukahyet, Nuklukait, Nuclaciayat, Nuklukyat, Tuklukyet, and Noukelakayet. The Tozitna River, another prominent locational feature, has many spellings: Tazekaket, Tosechaygut, Tozi, Tozie, Tozekaket, Tozikaat, Tozeekkaakket, and Tozeeechaakket. Other possibly confusing terms include “downriver,” which stands for the direction of the current, and “upriver,” meaning against the current. Determination of “right” bank and “left” bank is always made as one faces downriver.

Environment

The historic site locations are in a bottomland spruce/poplar forest, part of the Nowitna Lowlands of the greater Yukon River drainage system, as defined by Selkregg (1974). Shoreline and island vegetation consist primarily of spruce trees, with a few poplar trees and an understory including various grasses,aconitum, horsetail, and fireweed. The Yukon River supports several resident fish species, including pike and whitefish, along with major spawning runs of anadromous king, chum, “dog,” and silver salmon. This riparian environment is also an area of concentration for a large variety and number of mammals.
CHRONOLOGY OF THE RUSSIAN AND BRITISH PERIOD

During the 1800s, it was less hazardous politically for private companies to claim new territory than sovereign countries. The East India Company acted as the political arm of the British in the East, whereas its counterpart in the New World was the Hudson's Bay Company. The Russian American Company provided a similar vehicle for Russian expansion into North America. The Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian American Company were, thus, not only trading companies, but agents of their respective countries.

After establishing themselves in the Aleutians and on the Alaska Peninsula, the Russians began to push north in 1819. In 1838, starting from St. Michael near the mouth of the Yukon River, Andrei Glazunov explored the lower Yukon, known to the Russians as the Kvikhpak. Petr Malakhov also explored the river in 1838-40, going inland as far as present-day Nulato (Fedorova, 1973). Later, a Russian named Derabin built a post at Nulato; he became the first bidarshik (head trader) and called it Fort Derabin. He was killed in the 1851 Nulato massacre. Afterward, the post was rebuilt and named for the nearby Nulato River. In 1842 Lieutenant L.A. Zagoskin traveled up the Yukon to Nulato and the next spring ascended as far as the Nowikaket (Nowitna) River. Turning back at a rapids, he later reported it was impossible for skin boats to travel farther upriver (Dall, 1870:47-52, 276). Captain C.W. Raymond (1900:22) later called this place Halls Rapids.

Noochuloghoyet Point (A) (prehistoric and historic)

Noochuloghoyet Point was a place of neutral ground located on a peninsula formed by the confluence of the Tanana and Yukon rivers several hundred kilometres downriver from Fort Yukon. Originally, this was a place where Indians from different groups met each year to celebrate the change of seasons from winter to spring. Around 1861, the Russians started coming to Noochuloghoyet Point each spring to trade for furs. From Fort Yukon, the Hudson's Bay Company also sent several parties of Indians to trade. In 1862, Hudson's Bay traders traveled down the Yukon as far as the Nowitna River; nevertheless,
they organized no other posts within Russian-America. The bidarshik at St. Michael learned of Fort Yukon from the Indians and became determined to learn more about the fort. In the summer of 1863, he sent a Creole named Ivan Simonson Lukeen to investigate. Lukeen navigated the Yukon River from Nulato east to Fort Yukon, linking the Russian-American and Canadian regions of the Yukon River. Although the Russians learned that Fort Yukon was in their territory, they took no action (Dall, 1870:276). The Yukon River was called the Kivhpak from St. Michael to Noochuloghoyet Point and the Youkon from Noochuloghoyet Point to Fort Yukon (Adams, 1982:133).

In 1866, because of difficulties encountered with attempts to lay a trans-Atlantic cable, the Western Union Telegraph Company (WUTC) sought an alternative transcontinental route across Alaska and Asia to Europe. To determine its feasibility, the company sent employees into the Yukon District. The first exploration party included Robert Kennicott (director), Frank Kechem, and Michael Laberge. Kennicott died of an apparent heart attack at Nulato, but Kechem and Laberge continued to carry on the survey work (Dall, 1898). In spring 1866, with Lukeen as a guide, they ascended the Yukon River as far as Fort Yukon; they then returned to Nulato and crossed over to St. Michael by portage. In 1867, Kechem and Laberge surveyed east again as far as Fort Selkirk and then returned to Fort Yukon. Later in the spring, starting from St. Michael, the WUTC scientific researcher William H. Dall and artist Frederick Whymper traveled east to Fort Yukon, where they met Kechem and Laberge. The group then returned to St. Michael (Dall, 1870:277; Dall, 1898).

The succeeding spring the party made a further reconnaissance of the Yukon District, traveling eastward from Nulato to Fort Yukon using a haidar (skin boat). They were accompanied by Russian American Company employees, including a trader named Pavloff, as far as Noochuloghoyet Point. The traders were escorting a flotilla of birch bark canoes that contained goods to barter. They sought the yearly harvest of furs brought by Indian tribes (Dall, 1898:91-94; Whymper, 1869:228-230). At the same time, Hudson’s Bay Company traders made the trip west from Fort Yukon to Noochuloghoyet Point. Because the Russians, coming east, were delayed by current and ice, many times the “Scotsmen” got there first and purchased the available skins (Raymond, 1900:20). The Russians often had to settle for pelts from later Native arrivals (K. Arndt, pers. comm. 1991). After parting company with the traders at Noochuloghoyet Point, Dall and his party continued on to Fort Yukon. Later, they learned of the successful laying of the trans-Atlantic cable, which stopped the need for further WUTC exploration in Alaska (Dall, 1870:358).

CHRONOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN PERIOD

The sale of Russian-America to the United States in 1867 came shortly after the American Civil War. Because the U.S. government in Washington, D.C., was largely involved with the “reconstruction” of the South, administration of Alaska passed first to the U.S. Army, then to the U.S. Customs Service, and finally to the U.S. Navy. Other than the later discussed mission of Captain Raymond (1900) to dispossess the Hudson’s Bay Company of Fort Yukon, these bureaucracies took little political action in the Alaskan interior for the first twenty years. During this period, after several mergers, the Alaska Commercial Company took control of the Nulato, Noochuloghoyet, and Fort Yukon trading posts (Schwatka, 1900; Mercier, 1986). Within part of this period, this company also owned most of the Yukon River steamers and thus became a principal influence on the river because of its ownership of several trading posts and its control of the majority of river traffic.

Fort Yukon was still in operation as a British trading post when Russian-America was sold to the United States in 1867. Two years later, the U.S. government sent Captain C.W. Raymond to determine if Fort Yukon was in Canadian territory.